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PETERSBURG  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW OF HERBERT COULTON

conducted by

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Virginia State University

Petersburg, Virginia

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(Interview of Mr. Coulton  
conducted by Dr. Alkebulan)

(Recording starts mid sentence)

Q -- the 15th, 2007. We're here with Mr. Herbert Coulton. This interview is for the City of Petersburg Oral History Project. Mr. Coulton, could you tell us what your occupation was and the year of your birth and where you were born.

A Yes. My occupation was with Life Insurance Company of Virginia, which I retired from, and also the President for a while of the Virginia State Union of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Q Very good.

A My year of birth is April 22nd, 1934. I was born right here in Petersburg, Virginia.

Q Have you lived any other places besides Petersburg?

A I have. I have lived in Atlanta, Georgia.

Q How long did you live there?

A Three years.

Q Okay. In so far as you know, your ancestors, were they slaves or free blacks; and did they come from here in Petersburg?

- 1           A     They came from Prince George.
- 2           Q     Prince George County.
- 3           A     I think there's a mixture.
- 4           Q     Slaves and free blacks?
- 5           A     Slaves and free blacks. My great  
6 grandfather was a free black.
- 7           Q     What was his last name?
- 8           A     Coureton.
- 9           Q     Could you spell it?
- 10          A     C-o-u-r-e-t-o-n.
- 11          Q     And do you know his first name?
- 12          A     Henry.
- 13          Q     Henry Coureton. And his wife?
- 14          A     I know her name. I just can't think of it  
15 right now.
- 16          Q     Okay. No problem. Now, he was a free  
17 man --
- 18          A     Yes.
- 19          Q     -- prior to the Civil War?
- 20          A     Yes.
- 21          Q     Do you know of any others that were slaves  
22 prior to the Civil War?
- 23          A     His parents were slaves.
- 24          Q     Okay. Oh, I see.
- 25          A     I also think that he had some -- I know

1 this pretty good. The problem is I am just -- my  
2 memory just slipped when it comes to her.

3 Q Okay. Okay.

4 A And I'm saying her because we choose to  
5 use her for our family reunions.

6 Q Oh, is that right?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Okay.

9 A We have gone back and discovered some  
10 things about her.

11 Q Okay.

12 A If you can recall how I spelled that name,  
13 C-o-u-r-e-t-o-n.

14 Q Okay.

15 A That's what my name was supposed to be.

16 Q Oh.

17 A But midwives, when you were born years  
18 ago, they spelled the name as they heard it, and if  
19 you don't change it within a year, then it becomes  
20 an official name, so all of my dad's people were  
21 C-o-u-l-t-o-n.

22 Q Okay.

23 A And then the family, there are also some  
24 C-o-u-l -- C-o-u-l-t-o-n.

25 Q Right.

1 A Some C-o-u-r-e-t-o-n, some C-o-u-r-t-o-n.

2 Q So there was a whole variety of spelling  
3 but it's all the same family.

4 A All the same family.

5 Q Now, you mentioned your great grandfather  
6 and his parents. When you were growing up, who were  
7 the most important influences in your life?

8 A My dad.

9 Q Your dad. Why is that?

10 A Well, my mother died when I was three  
11 weeks old.

12 Q Oh, I see.

13 A My dad washed for us, cooked for us, sewed  
14 for us, plastered the house, wallpapered the house,  
15 could do everything with the exception of electrical  
16 work and plumbing.

17 Q Okay.

18 A Everything else he could do.

19 Q Hold on one minute, Mr. Coulton.

20 What was your father's trade?

21 A My father was a fourth grade dropout.

22 Q Okay. Okay.

23 A He worked first for the WPA. I can't  
24 think right now what that was.

25 Q Works Progress Administration.

1           A     Yeah.  Came home one day, and he told me  
2 he'd made a raise, 5-cent raise, and now he was  
3 making 22 cents an hour.  Well, before then  
4 obviously he was making 17 cents.  But it was a  
5 miracle how he took care of four children --

6           Q     Yes, it sounds like it.

7           A     -- off of 22 cents an hour, less than  
8 \$10.00 a week.

9           Q     Okay.

10          A     He then was able to get a job, where he  
11 retired from, from the Norfolk and Western Railroad.

12          Q     What did he do with the railroad?

13          A     He stacked mail.

14          Q     Stacked mail.  So he worked in the mail  
15 car or in the depot?

16          A     Mail car.

17          Q     Mail car.  As you were growing up, what is  
18 your first recollection of someone violating your  
19 civil rights?

20          A     My first encounter really was when I went  
21 to the Army in August of 1957.

22          Q     Okay.  How old were you at that time?

23          A     I was 21 years old.

24          Q     21.  Okay.

25          A     For some reason, the sergeant gave the

1 meal tickets to me, and when we -- we were on our  
2 way -- I had finished my basic training at Fort  
3 Jackson, South Carolina.

4 Q Columbia, South Carolina, right?

5 A Yeah. Columbia, South Carolina is Fort  
6 Jackson. And we were on our way to a Hawaii, but we  
7 had stopped in Atlanta to eat, and at that time  
8 Atlanta had an old, dilapidated airport, but it did  
9 have a restaurant in it, so we stopped to have  
10 lunch, and I took out my meal tickets and the head  
11 waiter came to me -- came to us and said, you white  
12 fellows, go in there and eat with the rest of the  
13 people. Now, you colored fellows, wait here until I  
14 get a black (inaudible.)

15 Q Was this a black man or a white man?

16 A Black man.

17 Q Okay, he's the head waiter. I got you.

18 A He's the head water.

19 Q Okay.

20 A And I said, no, we're not going to eat.

21 And he said, well that's the law.

22 I said, well, it may be the law, but  
23 here we are in the U.S. Army, we're subject to go  
24 somewhere and fight together, we're going to eat  
25 together because we might die together.

1                   Well, when I didn't allow them to eat  
2 with those meal tickets, one of the white fellows,  
3 well, Herb, we could beat you and take those  
4 tickets.

5                   I said, no. You could beat me, but  
6 on the way down, I'm tearing these tickets up. You  
7 will not eat in this restaurant.

8           Q     You were a private first class?

9           A     Yeah.

10          Q     Okay.

11          A     And when I got to Hawaii my CO called me  
12 and told me I was subject for a court marshal.

13          Q     Was this Fort Shafter, Hawaii?

14          A     No. This was -- I was at Schofield  
15 Barracks.

16          Q     Schofield Barracks. All right.

17          A     Yeah. And I said to him -- he asked me  
18 did I have the tickets. I said, sure. I said the  
19 same thing would happen right today, right now, I  
20 would do the same thing.

21                   He said, well, we're going to court  
22 marshal you. You go back to your camp. We'll call  
23 you later.

24                   Well, this is 2007, they haven't  
25 called me yet.



1 Q Haven't court marshaled you yet.

2 A Haven't called me.

3 Q That's a long time. That's fifty some  
4 years.

5 A Yeah.

6 Q Do you recall anything like that happening  
7 in Petersburg between 1950 and 1980?

8 A Oh, I recall a tremendous amount of  
9 segregation.

10 Q What kind of impact did that have on you?

11 A I didn't feel good about it at all.

12 Q Okay.

13 A Aid felt even worse once I had gotten  
14 discharged from the Army because my CO and my first  
15 sergeant was always talking about what they were  
16 going to do when they were at home.

17 Q Right.

18 A You can recall now that Rosa Parks  
19 incident happened December, 1955.

20 Q That's right.

21 A This was '57.

22 Q Right.

23 A And they were still talking to me about  
24 (inaudible) my sister wrote me and told me a black  
25 man tried to sit by her, all that kind of stuff.

1 Q Okay. So your CO and your first sergeant  
2 were from the south, then?

3 A Yeah. One from Tennessee, one from  
4 Georgia.

5 Q Okay. Now you got out of the Army in what  
6 year?

7 A 1959.

8 Q And you went back to Petersburg?

9 A Came back to Petersburg.

10 Q Were you married?

11 A Single.

12 Q Single. When you got back to Petersburg,  
13 what sort of incidents of segregation did you come  
14 upon and what effect did this have on the community  
15 at large?

16 A Well, when I got back I had the  
17 situation -- I got a job with Central State  
18 Hospital.

19 Q Okay. Tell us what Central State Hospital  
20 is.

21 A Mental hospital.

22 Q Okay. It's here in Petersburg?

23 A Here in Petersburg. And they had a  
24 segregated restaurant, blacks eat on one side,  
25 whites eat on the other side, and I got together

1 with some group of black employees to tell them  
2 blacks don't eat there. If we can't eat on the best  
3 side, which was the white side, we won't eat. That  
4 was partially successful. But the thing that really  
5 had a great impact was the fact that there was a  
6 restaurant -- there was a store, Valentine's Market,  
7 that would not hire blacks, yet most of his business  
8 came from blacks, based on his location. So we were  
9 picketing there, and Central State came by and took  
10 pictures of us picketing.

11 Q The authorities at Central State, the  
12 administration?

13 A Blew up pictures to find me on it. They  
14 didn't do it just for me. They were trying to see  
15 who else was there. So I said, why don't you call  
16 me in. Still working there.

17 And so Mr. Golden said, we aren't  
18 calling you on your job, about your job. You do  
19 your job very well. However, you are picketing,  
20 which is against the state rules. We don't want  
21 anybody to picket that works at Central State.  
22 We're going to have to ask you to stop.

23 And I said, well, I'm not going to  
24 stop.

25 He said, well, you know we could fire

1 you.

2 I said, well, you could fire me  
3 today, but as soon as I get off I'm going on the  
4 picket line. I said, it's now 2:30. I get off at  
5 4:00. At 4:30 I'll be on the picket line. Whether  
6 I am fired or not, I'll be on the picket line.

7 I could get another job. It really  
8 didn't bother me. They didn't fire me.

9 Q They didn't fire you?

10 A No, they didn't fire.

11 Q What was your job then?

12 A I was working hand in hand with patients.

13 Q Okay. Got you.

14 A Now, that lead to my going back to the  
15 area that I lived in Petersburg, (inaudible), and I  
16 started going door to door trying to find out who  
17 was registered to vote because you had a real  
18 problem, not just that you weren't registered, but  
19 you also have to pay your poll tax.

20 Q How much was poll tax?

21 A A dollar and a half a year. Many of them  
22 had not registered, so they had to pay them \$4.50.  
23 \$4.50 was tough. Lord knows, people just didn't  
24 have it. Then to go upstairs in city hall on the  
25 third floor, and deal with Gillian who was the

1 registrar was rough, because he had -- he had  
2 derived from the paragraphs ten questions in order.  
3 If you get anything wrong, you have failed.

4 Q So this was to prove your understanding of  
5 the law?

6 A This was for intimidation purposes.

7 Q Okay. Okay.

8 A Because that was not -- now, what we did,  
9 one of the young ladies was in that room the other  
10 day, Ann Jackson, I can't think of her married name.

11 Q Ellison?

12 A Hmm?

13 Q Was it Ellison?

14 A Ellison I think it was.

15 Q Right.

16 A And I sent Ann down to the registrar, drew  
17 up a form, just name, address, how long have you  
18 lived there, something very simple. The registrar  
19 turned it down. We took it to court and won. And  
20 that's when they started the form of just name and  
21 address and something simple.

22 Q Something simple that --

23 A Right, that people could just do. So she  
24 went down there for us and was able to -- we were  
25 able to get that changed. Mean while, the library

1 was about ready to get started.

2 Q Okay.

3 A They had a very viable black preacher at  
4 Gilfield Baptist Church, Wyatt Walker.

5 Q Wyatt Walker.

6 A And Wyatt took a group of people to the  
7 library. He told me, Herb, just keep doing what you  
8 are doing. We have got to have somebody represent  
9 us. It was an unspectacular job of rolling your  
10 sleeves up, knocking on doors. You know, it wasn't  
11 no kind of thing that you do to get publicity.

12 Q So it was nuts-and-bolts organizational  
13 work?

14 A Yes. Yes.

15 Q Okay.

16 A So that's what we did, and of course the  
17 two came together.

18 Q Right.

19 A The jail and the people going to register,  
20 Wyatt Walker leaving. King saw some administrative  
21 ability that he had that King admitted that he did  
22 not have. He needed Wyatt Walker there to be the  
23 first full-time executive Director of the Southern  
24 Christian Leadership Conference. Walker left  
25 Gilfield, but he asked Gilfield to give me a

1 two-year leave of absence without pay, and they  
2 refused. They were, I think, happy to get rid of  
3 Wyatt because it was embarrassing to them. That was  
4 one of the blue-collar churches and it was barely  
5 any amens in there before Walker came. The bulk of  
6 the congregation were light skinned, and they were  
7 happy to get rid of Wyatt Walker.

8                   Wyatt told me when he left, said  
9 Herb, you are doing a good job. We are now still to  
10 expand. I would like for you to come to work for  
11 SCLC.

12                   And I said, well, I will consider it.  
13 So a year and a half later --

14           Q     That's when you went to Atlanta?

15           A     Yeah. He had arranged an interview with  
16 me with Martin Luther King.

17           Q     Okay. Before we get to Atlanta, let me  
18 ask you this; when were schools in Petersburg  
19 integrated?

20           A     When?

21           Q     Yes. And were you there when that  
22 happened?

23           A     That was -- yes.

24           Q     Okay.

25           A     That was about 1970.

1 Q 1970?

2 A Yes. Between '69 and '70.

3 Q '69 and 70. Let me ask you this then:

4 When the children in Petersburg had to go to  
5 integrated schools, what happened to them? How did  
6 it affect them?

7 A Well, they -- they formed a little group  
8 committee.

9 Q These were black children?

10 A Yeah. And told the teachers, leave us  
11 alone. We're going to get this thing resolved, and  
12 they did. They almost paved their own way.

13 Q The children at the school?

14 A Yeah.

15 Q And these were black and white children?

16 A Black and white children. And they became  
17 one. There were no riots.

18 Q Okay.

19 A They had proven themselves and they were  
20 accepted.

21 Q Okay.

22 A It wasn't easy, but I have to give the  
23 young people most of the credit for that.

24 Q Okay.

25 A They had some adults, Dr. Granville



1 Norris, who is now deceased, had his daughter there.  
2 He was very integral in seeing that she was placed.  
3 And John R. Long.

4 Q Was she a high school student?

5 A High school student.

6 Q Yeah.

7 A They had come from Bolling Junior High  
8 School.

9 Q A black high school?

10 A No. No.

11 Q A white high school?

12 A It was mixed.

13 Q Okay.

14 A They had mixed then. There were several  
15 good athletes --

16 Q Okay.

17 A -- who decided to go to Petersburg High to  
18 sort of break that monopoly of white ball players  
19 playing. They got on the team and they played.

20 Q You mentioned a couple of men, Norris and  
21 Long.

22 A Right.

23 Q What were some of the other leaders in the  
24 struggle and what exactly -- how did they help?

25 A I am speaking now of people who were

1 visible working with individual schools.

2 Q Okay. That's all right.

3 A Norris, Long, Cole, C-o-l-e.

4 Q Uh-huh.

5 A John Cole is his name. His wife  
6 was (inaudible). They had a daughter. They worked  
7 very hard in that. And perhaps a few others, but  
8 those were some of those persons who really worked  
9 hard in the schools then. Now, there were others;  
10 David Gunther. David Gunther was a food supervisor  
11 at Virginia State who played a tremendous part.

12 Q Okay. Right.

13 A He was able to get the students at  
14 Virginia State involved in the struggle.

15 Q In school integration, or in  
16 demonstrations and picketing?

17 A In demonstrations and picketing. He was  
18 telling them that it is all right to go to school,  
19 but there's a revolution. They are two needs  
20 together, and you need to walk on downtown and join,  
21 and they did. The Life Magazine of September,  
22 1960 --

23 Q Right.

24 A -- had Virginia State students in there.  
25 Virginia Thornton. Virginia Thornton was the, I

1 think, president of the student body, who was able  
2 to get a lot of students. I think Virginia now --  
3 last I heard he was a professor at VCU. I don't  
4 know if he is still there or not.

5 Q When was the last time you heard about  
6 that?

7 A Oh --

8 Q 10, 12 years ago, 15?

9 A Yeah. About 10, 12 years ago. And then  
10 there was another fellow, Dr. MacLloyd.

11 Q MacLloyd, right here at Virginia State?

12 A No. MacLloyd, he was very integral in the  
13 move here in the system who I think now is at VCU.

14 Q Okay. So there was MacLloyd and Virginia  
15 Staunton?

16 A Virginia Thornton.

17 Q Okay.

18 A Right.

19 Q Was that Thornton or Staunton?

20 A No. Thornton.

21 Q Thornton. Got you. Got you.

22 A Right.

23 Q Do you know about any outsiders coming to  
24 Petersburg to help with the struggle or was it  
25 pretty much home grown?

1           A     It was pretty much home grown, because we  
2 were involved -- we got the Petersburg -- we formed  
3 the Petersburg Improvement Association.

4           Q     What year?

5           A     1960.

6           Q     Okay.

7           A     It was probably --

8           Q     Excuse me.

9           A     -- one of the best improvement  
10 associations in the state.

11          Q     What was the goal of the organization?

12          A     Well, really to redeem the souls of  
13 America.

14          Q     That's -- that's a lot.

15          A     That's where we were. And we were able to  
16 get that out of Wyatt Walker, you see. Then we  
17 had -- well, we had the Lynchburg Improvement  
18 Association, the Hopewell, the Roanoke, the Norfolk.  
19 You know, it was all over the state.

20          Q     Okay. So that was my next question.  
21 Organizations to help with these activities in  
22 Petersburg was the Petersburg Improvement  
23 Association. Any others right here in Petersburg?

24          A     NAACP.

25          Q     NAACP we know.

1           A     Well, see the Petersburg Improvement  
2 Association became an affiliate --

3           Q     Okay.

4           A     -- of the Southern Christian Leadership  
5 Conference.

6           Q     I see.

7           A     You see.

8           Q     Okay. Was it -- did they give guidance to  
9 you, or did you have your own agenda that fit  
10 Petersburg in, it was like a meeting of equals?

11          A     It was a meeting of equals.

12          Q     I understand.

13          A     They had a situation where they would  
14 bring in things that were necessary from the  
15 Atlanta, which was the headquarters.

16          Q     Okay.

17          A     But for the most part, Hosea Williams came  
18 here to work. Hosea was in charge of our national  
19 voter registration. He came. Randolph Blackwell  
20 came. I am calling these name. Unfortunately,  
21 these guys are now deceased.

22          Q     Now, these are men from Atlanta, Georgia?

23          A     From Atlanta, Georgia.

24          Q     Who was the head of the Petersburg --  
25 involved in the Improvement Association?

1           A     The Reverend -- Wyatt T. Walker was the  
2 first one.

3           Q     Okay.

4           A     When he left, going to Atlanta, Reverend  
5 R. G. Williams.

6           Q     What church was he affiliated with?

7           A     Zion Baptist Church.

8           Q     Zion Baptist Church.

9           A     Where Reverend Andrew White is now.

10          Q     Okay. Let me ask you this: What did the  
11 NAACP do? Did they file court cases or did they  
12 participate in demonstrations?

13          A     Court cases, mainly. Unfortunately the  
14 reason that Wyatt Walker -- and I keep calling  
15 Wyatt's name because Wyatt was basically my mentor,  
16 but the reason I mention this was because -- the  
17 reason Wyatt Walker went to library because he was  
18 an active member of the NAACP to take on his case  
19 and they didn't.

20          Q     To file a court case?

21          A     To file a court case. They said they had  
22 too many court cases, they couldn't get to that  
23 immediately. Then Wyatt Walker said, if nobody is  
24 going to step on my toes, then I can't holler, so  
25 he, himself started that.

1           Q     Now we're talking about places that were  
2 segregated before the civil rights movement had  
3 started. Could you give me a couple of names of  
4 different establishments that were segregated and  
5 what about them, how they transacted their business?

6           A     All of the stores in Petersburg --

7           Q     All right.

8           A     -- were segregated.

9           Q     Okay.

10          A     I could name you some.

11          Q     Okay.

12          A     Globe Department Store --

13          Q     Got you.

14          A     -- which was the leading men's store in  
15 town. Petersburg at that time had eleven men's  
16 stores --

17          Q     Eleven.

18          A     -- on Sycamore Street alone.

19          Q     When you went in and tried to buy some  
20 clothes, how did they treat you? What did they do?

21          A     You could buy clothes there.

22          Q     Right.

23          A     They want you to spend your money, but to  
24 get somebody to work there as a sales person is  
25 where the problem started.

1 Q Would they let you try on the clothes or  
2 would they --

3 A Men could try on clothes. At one time men  
4 couldn't try on hats, or men could not try on shoes.  
5 My dad would take my shoe and draw a line around it  
6 and take that downtown. That's where I got the  
7 first corn on my toe. I was six years old.

8 Q Because they were too small.

9 A They were too small but they were pretty  
10 and I wanted to keep them.

11 Q Okay.

12 A And so I didn't tell my dad until it was  
13 too late. I had worn them too many times.

14 Q Right.

15 A And he saw me hopping one day. He said,  
16 what's wrong? I just bought you some shoes, boy.  
17 What's your problem? And the shoes were too small.  
18 And that's because he couldn't take me downtown --

19 Q And try on a pair of shoes?

20 A -- and try on a pair of shoes.

21 Q What about women?

22 A Women caught it even worse. Spiro's was  
23 one of those stores downtown. It's no longer there.  
24 Women could go in but they couldn't try on the hats.

25 Q What about dresses or slips?



1           A     I really don't know. I don't think they  
2 were able to do that, but they had no sales person  
3 in any of those stores.

4           Q     No black sales person?

5           A     No black person in any of those stores.

6           Q     What about eating establishments?

7           A     Eating establishments you could go in and  
8 eat but you couldn't sit down.

9           Q     Okay. So you had to stand up and eat it  
10 or take it with you?

11          A     You could stand up, eat it, or take it  
12 with you.

13          Q     But it wasn't any sitting down?

14          A     No sitting down.

15          Q     What about the health department, social  
16 services, were they segregated?

17          A     They were segregated.

18          Q     How did that play out?

19          A     When integration came, it seemed that they  
20 had meetings and decide to hire one.

21          Q     This was the establishment in town. I  
22 understand.

23          A     Try to have one. Then that one worked out  
24 pretty good, and then they tried one more and this  
25 kind of thing, but it was a very, very slow process.

1 And I know at the bus station, whites never -- there  
2 was a wall. Blacks was on one side of that wall,  
3 whites on -- but they got on the same bus and blacks  
4 would sit in the back of that bus.

5 Q All right. I see.

6 A The whole town was segregated, no  
7 question.

8 Q Right. What about sports and recreation  
9 facilities, like parks or swimming pools?

10 A Segregated again.

11 Q Okay.

12 A We had -- we talked a little bit about  
13 this when we had the meetings over there first off.  
14 There was -- there was a swimming pool.

15 Q Black swimming pool?

16 A No. Wilcox Lake. There were no black  
17 swimming pools. Wilcox Lake. Blacks wanted to  
18 finally integrate that.

19 Q Right.

20 A And what happened was, petitions were  
21 signed.

22 Q All right.

23 A The city officials looked at the names of  
24 those who signed and all of them who worked for the  
25 city were fired.

1 Q (Inaudible).

2 A And Mrs. Avon --

3 Q What kind of job did they have with the  
4 city?

5 A Ms. Avon was principal of (inaudible)  
6 School. Mr. Alphonso McCain -- (inaudible) -- Mr.  
7 Alphonso McCain, we haven't been able to find him.  
8 One time I saw him in Roanoke, but he has since  
9 moved from Roanoke. He was in charge of the old  
10 Highland Street Recreation Center.

11 Q Which was black?

12 A Which was black.

13 Q Okay.

14 A Which Peabody used to play their  
15 basketball games there because their gym was too  
16 small, and discovered that the basketball court at  
17 the Y was also too small.

18 Q Okay.

19 A But he was fired. Anybody who worked for  
20 the city --

21 Q Was terminated?

22 A -- was terminated.

23 Q What about Lee Park? I keep hearing about  
24 Lee Park. What was Lee Park?

25 A Well, we learned about Lee Park later. It

1 was also a golf course.

2 Q Uh-huh.

3 A And it was a situation there where blacks  
4 weren't able to play there. Petersburg, they had a  
5 number of golf courses. In order to play there in  
6 many instances you had to be a member of the golf  
7 team, and they had set the fees so high, and also  
8 we've had several good golfers who had they gotten  
9 sponsors could have turned pro.

10 Q So Tiger Woods wasn't the first one?

11 A No. So what happened, they just weren't  
12 able to play.

13 Q They had no place to practice?

14 A No place to practice.

15 Q Did the black community have a park they  
16 could play in?

17 A They had a football field which was West  
18 End Park, which had kind of a small, dirt track  
19 around it.

20 Q No place for picnics or anything like  
21 that?

22 A You could picnic there when they were not  
23 playing ball. Usually in the summertime they would  
24 probably go there and have a picnic. But for the  
25 most part -- and some other elementary schools that

1 had playgrounds, they would have picnics there.

2 Q You mentioned a little earlier about the  
3 bus station, now there was a black side and a white  
4 side, and we always see these signs in the  
5 documentaries, sometimes in the museums now, like  
6 down at the Seeds Museum, colored here, white there,  
7 et cetera; where were these signs placed and what  
8 did the black side look like in terms of -- I mean  
9 you described the restaurant at Central State  
10 Hospital. Were the black facilities always  
11 inferior?

12 A Always.

13 Q Always?

14 A Always.

15 Q All right. And these signs were  
16 everywhere, all public facilities?

17 A Yeah. If you saw a water fountain, right  
18 here, if this is a water fountain, under there would  
19 say "white." And they had another one that said  
20 "colored." And they had another one that said  
21 "white ladies," and "colored women."

22 Q What about bus stops? Can anybody sit  
23 down at the bus stop?

24 A If you went to the bus stop -- are you  
25 talking about local buses?

1 Q Yes, sir.

2 A If you went to the bus stops, there were  
3 no stations. You just caught the bus.

4 Q Oh, okay.

5 A You paid the fare, sit in the back.

6 Q Okay. Now, the Greyhound Bus station,  
7 what was the difference between the white side and  
8 the black side? Same thing with the train station,  
9 as far as you can remember?

10 A The Greyhound Bus station was a small bus  
11 station. They had -- I'm trying to remember -- I  
12 can remember the Trailways much better because the  
13 police came at the Trailways, we were picketing  
14 Trailways. And there were negotiations between  
15 several blacks and whites, and they agreed to  
16 integrate the Trailways Bus station in five states  
17 as a result of what we did here in Petersburg at the  
18 Trailways Bus station. And of course included in  
19 there was the Greyhound Bus station.

20 Q Interstate commerce?

21 A Yeah.

22 Q Okay. When you went to the Trailways Bus  
23 station and you looked at the different sides, white  
24 and black, what made the black side inferior?

25 A Roaches.

1           Q     Roaches.  What about eating  
2 accommodations?

3           A     Eating accommodations, you sit at a bar  
4 and eat your food.  Whites had tables and chairs.

5           Q     Bathrooms?

6           A     Bathrooms were not in the best conditions.

7           Q     They weren't cleaned as often as white  
8 bathrooms?

9           A     Nowhere near as clean as the white ones.

10          Q     What role did the churches play in  
11 eliminating all this discrimination?

12          A     Unfortunately, we had four or five  
13 churches in Petersburg that was really with us.

14          Q     Okay.

15          A     And that's because of the ministers.

16          Q     Okay.

17          A     Some ministers out of fear did not get in  
18 it.  There were others who told their congregations  
19 to get in it.

20          Q     Let me ask you this:  The ones that were  
21 participating, were they Baptist, AME, Presbyterian  
22 or all across the board?

23          A     Mostly Baptist.

24          Q     Mostly Baptist.  And you say there were  
25 about four or five churches that participated, but

1 the vast majority did not.

2 A The vast majority did not.

3 Q Would that apply, would that same rule  
4 apply to the ones that did not; were they mostly  
5 Baptist or AME or did it matter?

6 A Yeah, they were mostly Baptist.

7 Q Okay. So this is pretty much a Baptist  
8 town?

9 A It's a Baptist town.

10 Q Got you.

11 A See, you only had two -- at that time only  
12 had one Methodist church, one Presbyterian, one  
13 Catholic, one Episcopalian. It was basically  
14 Baptist.

15 Q So we're looking at a situation where a  
16 minimum of the churches participated, and you say  
17 the rest of them did not -- the ministers did not  
18 want them to participate because it was fear on  
19 their part, caution, et cetera. Did their  
20 congregations participate?

21 A In some instances, yes.

22 Q In some instances. Okay.

23 A Yes.

24 Q You mentioned earlier about Virginia --  
25 some of the students at Virginia State participated



1 in demonstrations, et cetera. What about Virginia  
2 Union?

3 A Virginia Union participated also in  
4 Richmond.

5 Q In Richmond. Do you think that --

6 A Norfolk State participated in Norfolk.

7 Q Was it the majority of students that  
8 participated or was it a minority as far as you can  
9 tell?

10 A It was a minority.

11 Q A minority. Did you go to the March on  
12 Washington?

13 A No. I was in jail.

14 Q You were in jail. Okay, tell us about  
15 that.

16 A August 28, 1963.

17 Q Yes, sir.

18 A I was arrested August the 22nd --

19 Q Got you.

20 A -- in Danville, Virginia. We were really  
21 raising a whole lot of people, and they had -- just  
22 after this, I might add, there were some blacks  
23 elected to the council in Danville because of --

24 Q Of voter registration?

25 A Because of voter registration. I was

1 arrested, and the charges was that I was blocking  
2 the street. I weighed 145 pounds. There's no way I  
3 could block the street.

4 Q You could block the street. I understand.

5 A But they arrested me, and we stayed over  
6 night, and we had arranged -- we had gotten a bus,  
7 taken students to Washington, and I told them to go  
8 ahead up.

9 Q Okay.

10 A I'll be in jail.

11 Q Okay.

12 A So I missed that march.

13 Q Do you think that the March on Washington  
14 helped the situation in Petersburg, and if so, how?

15 A Oh, yeah, I think so. I think what  
16 happened, people saw that they meant business.  
17 They -- believe it or not, that speech that King  
18 made laid a great -- it was a great impact on what  
19 we were doing, sort of motivated us to go on. We  
20 can't stop now. We got to keep on. And so they  
21 kept on. They kept on.

22 Q You just mentioned Martin Luther King.  
23 Now, we know that he was assassinated in 1968, along  
24 with Robert Kennedy. Kennedy's brother, John  
25 Kennedy, was assassinated in '63. What was your

1 reaction to the death of these men?

2 A I felt bad, particularly with King.

3 Q Right.

4 A Believe it or not, Wyatt Walker had left  
5 Atlanta then, and had gone to New York. Edward  
6 Young became the executive director and called me  
7 and said, Herb, I want you to get a people-to-people  
8 tour for the poor people's March in Washington.

9 Q That's in '68 we're talking about?

10 A '68.

11 Q Yes, sir.

12 A And he said to me, get some cities, give  
13 me a call. (Inaudible). Started in '68.

14 I said, okay, King, will catch a  
15 flight from Atlanta to Norfolk, shake hands with  
16 people, recruit people to go to Washington to the  
17 Poor People's March, he will leave Norfolk, go to  
18 Suffolk, leave Suffolk -- all this is in a day -- go  
19 to Suffolk, leave Suffolk and go to Ivor, leave Ivor  
20 and go the Waverly. Waverly, we had a situation  
21 that we had one woman who had 27 children.

22 Q I have never heard talk about this woman.

23 A Leave Waverly, go to Hopewell. Leave  
24 Hopewell, come to Petersburg. Leave Petersburg, go  
25 to Richmond, catch the last flight back to Atlanta.

1 Q Goodness. All in one day?

2 A All in one day. And he said, Herb, we  
3 like this. You have gone from the east of Virginia,  
4 Norfolk, coming west, going north to Richmond, and  
5 putting us back in Atlanta late that night. They  
6 approved it, but if you can recall, there were  
7 incidents, and that young man had gotten killed, and  
8 King wanted to go back in there --

9 Q That's right.

10 A -- to prove that he could have a  
11 successful, non-violent march.

12 Q I got you.

13 A And for that reason -- and they called me  
14 back and they said, Herb, hold onto the plans.  
15 We're going to have to postpone this, we're not  
16 canceling, we're postponing, and we'll get back with  
17 you after this march.

18 Well, he got killed (inaudible). So  
19 I felt bad, terribly bad. Many, many people's claim  
20 to fame they marched with King. Many of them  
21 didn't, but they like to tell people they did. I  
22 enjoyed the journey with King. I really was not  
23 going to stay in the movement as long as I did.  
24 Every time I got ready to leave he would say to me,  
25 Herb, I need you. Please don't leave me.

1 Q How long did you stay with it?

2 A Ten years.

3 Q So you count from '59 through '69?

4 A Yeah. Yeah. Well, I didn't go there in

5 '59. I didn't really go until '61.

6 Q '61. All right.

7 A I stayed until the latter part of '70.

8 Q You are talking about Atlanta?

9 A No. No. I am talking about with the

10 movement.

11 Q The movement. I got you. I got you.

12 A In Atlanta I stayed from 1964 --

13 Q Okay.

14 A -- to 1967.

15 Q Let me ask you this, then; during all your

16 time in the movement, who would you say were some of

17 the other important leaders besides King?

18 A Andrew Young.

19 Q Okay.

20 A C.T. Vivian, Otis Moss.

21 Q Were these all SCLC people?

22 A SCLC people.

23 Q Okay. Now, you were in SCLC yourself,

24 right?

25 A Yeah.

1 Q Okay. So we have to count you in there as  
2 well.

3 A Yeah. Well --

4 Q Now, you worked here in Petersburg with  
5 SCLC?

6 A Yeah.

7 Q So we got Dr. King, we've got Reverend  
8 Young, C.T. Vivian, Reverend Moss?

9 A Otis Moss.

10 Q Otis Moss.

11 A Hosea Williams.

12 Q Hosea Williams.

13 A These were people who I know were  
14 dedicated.

15 Q I understand.

16 A Didn't have no problem about that  
17 dedication.

18 Q Okay.

19 A These were people when you called them,  
20 they came. If you needed some help anywhere they  
21 would be there. So I called these people because I  
22 knew of their situation. Now, I'm not leaving out  
23 NAACP. I just happened to have been open to SCLC  
24 people being on the staff.

25 Q I understand. Right. I understand. So

1 you have more familiarity with them?

2 A Oh, yes.

3 Q The police department in Petersburg during  
4 this period, what did you think of them?

5 A I didn't favor them.

6 Q Okay.

7 A They weren't so violent. They just didn't  
8 do anything, and did not want to have blacks on the  
9 force. Several blacks had taken the test and passed  
10 the test and were playing really a waiting game.

11 Q What do you mean?

12 A They were putting -- put their  
13 applications in the back file, not in the trash can,  
14 but in the back file, I'll get to it later.

15 Q Much later?

16 A Much later.

17 Q How did they police treat the black  
18 community?

19 A Most of the time things had already  
20 happened fast before they would arrive. Many of the  
21 police at that time -- let me give you an example of  
22 what I'm saying. A young lady on her way to school  
23 one morning was grabbed by somebody.

24 Q Uh-huh.

25 A Later on they found her in a well --

1 Q Oh, no.

2 A -- dead. She was about 11 or 12 years  
3 old. I formed a search for this young lady. The  
4 police called me to say, is it all right if we go  
5 along with you?

6 Q It should have been the other way around.

7 A It should have been the other way around.  
8 They should have been negotiating, they should have  
9 been organizing searches, but they had -- they went  
10 with me because I put on the radio that we're going  
11 to search. All persons who are interested in  
12 searching will meet at First Baptist Church, and  
13 we'll leave from there. My pastor and everybody  
14 else went with us, then the police came.

15 Q Who found the body?

16 A Much, much later. She was, of course,  
17 dead.

18 Q Had she been sexually assaulted?

19 A I don't think so. I didn't hear that. I  
20 don't think to this day have they ever found anybody  
21 who did that. There were two other young men found  
22 buried alive, and of course they found somebody in  
23 New Jersey who did that.

24 Q White man, black man?

25 A I believe they were black.



1 Q Okay.

2 A We think that the man who grabbed this  
3 young lady was white.

4 Q Why do you think that?

5 A Based on the description of the car that  
6 somebody saw, we -- we kind of think that it was a  
7 man who worked at the grocery store. It was  
8 never -- it was never a situation that blacks were  
9 suspected.

10 Q Did anybody ever follow up on this with  
11 this guy?

12 A We followed up on it but, of course, with  
13 the kind of police department we had, we didn't get  
14 too far with that.

15 Q This grocery store was in the black  
16 community?

17 A It was in the black community.

18 Q So he probably had seen this little girl  
19 before then, hmm?

20 A Oh, yeah, I think he did. He had.

21 Q What do you think about the way life is  
22 today compared to that 30-year time period between  
23 1950 and 1980?

24 A Well, I would be remiss to say that things  
25 are a lot better. I have seen all of that

1 segregation, and I have seen blacks in their  
2 positions that I never thought they would be in.

3 Q Okay.

4 A Petersburg is basically a black town.

5 (Turn tape to side 2.)

6 Q -- and the city manager?

7 A City manager and perhaps the commissioner  
8 of revenue, the treasurer, I think everybody else is  
9 black.

10 Q What about family life in the community,  
11 economics, things of that nature? Schools?

12 A Schools are atrocious. I don't put much  
13 faith in the schools. I am just saddened to know  
14 that our schools are in the kind of predicament that  
15 they are in.

16 Q What do you attribute that to?

17 A I feel that the lack of good teachers,  
18 good administrators --

19 Q Right.

20 A I think that's their role and we have too  
21 many teachers who are working for a salary and not  
22 really teaching children, and I felt that way for a  
23 long time.

24 Q Long time.

25 A We just need to get a better situation.

1 I'm sorry that the last superintendent we had before  
2 Hannan, I can't think of his name, I think he was  
3 about on the right track.

4 Q He was the right track.

5 A But they seemed to -- they meaning the  
6 school board wanted to micromanage him and of course  
7 he was not going for that, so he left for another  
8 superintendent's job some place else.

9 Q What do you think about family life  
10 compared to now -- compared to then?

11 A That -- it's better. Blacks are now able  
12 to move and live where they want to live, but there  
13 still is racism in that field, no question about it.  
14 Where I live there were, when I moved there, there  
15 were 100 homes, 70 percent of those homes were  
16 white, 30 were black. We thought that we would see  
17 a tremendous amount of white flight. Today, 23  
18 years later, there are 55 white homes, 45 black  
19 homes, which is not bad. A lot of the whites who  
20 moved were military and had orders to move.

21 Q Is this all out by Fort Lee?

22 A No. No. This is an area close to the  
23 high school called Camelot.

24 Q All right.

25 A This is an area that they felt that no

1 blacks would ever live. We moved there because we  
2 wanted to take a part of the American dream --

3 Q Of course.

4 A -- that you can live where you want to  
5 live, and it worked out. We have not seen nor have  
6 we had any crosses burned on our property, so things  
7 are moving on.

8 Q Okay. Who else do you think we should  
9 interview? We have a list of people that we made up  
10 some time ago. Is there anybody else on this list  
11 that you can think that deserved to be interviewed  
12 or should -- not deserved -- that's the wrong  
13 word -- or should be interviewed?

14 A I see some people here that  
15 actually probably needed to be interviewed but  
16 unfortunately -- that very first name William  
17 Powell, not able anymore, in a nursing home.

18 Q Do you think Wyatt T. Walker would be  
19 receptive to being interviewed?

20 A He might. Wyatt Walker is -- I'm looking  
21 at this list.

22 Q Uh-huh.

23 A Wyatt Walker is sick --

24 Q Yes.

25 A -- in a wheel chair. I don't know.

1 Q If he could do it?

2 A Whether or not he could do it, or it very  
3 well may be that a call to Wyatt might change that.  
4 I don't know.

5 Q Who do you think should call? Do you  
6 think we should call or a friend of his should call?  
7 The reason I'm asking, because he doesn't  
8 necessarily know us, but he might be more responsive  
9 to a friend?

10 A I don't know that he wouldn't be receptive  
11 to your call.

12 Q I have no problem with calling him.

13 A Now, the other thing --

14 Q This concludes our interview with Herbert  
15 Coulton today on March the 14th, 2007 at 101 Colson  
16 Hall at Virginia State University. I would like to  
17 express the thanks of the Petersburg Civil Rights  
18 Oral History Project to Mr. Coulton and we're going  
19 to continue on with our work for this.

20 Hopefully we'll be able to schedule  
21 some interviews beginning with Saturday, March 17th  
22 during our meeting up at Colson Hall -- excuse me --  
23 at Foster Hall.

24

25